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The Gentile Woman: Engagement with Suffering

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It is one thing to face pain oneself. It is another to be faced with the suffering of one's child. When our daughter, at the age of 14 months, was diagnosed as having cerebral palsy, a motor impairment condition, it seemed we had moved into another world. It was a world of hospitals, doctors, therapists, social workers and special educators. It was a world inhabited by other children who were experiencing life with impaired movement, great dependence and, sometimes, much discomfort. It was a world of parents caught in disbelief, anger, sadness and grief. We had moved into a different world but at first we wandered there as if in a thick fog, separated from others. We knew other children and their families were there but felt locked in our personal pain, unable to touch or be touched.

During the four years that have passed since our daughter's diagnosis, the fog has gradually thinned. I have met other parents and their unique children and have grieved for them and for myself. I have read books written by parents, especially mothers, telling their stories of living with chronically ill children and I have wept with them. I am suddenly sensitive to issues in the handicapped community as I think of life for my daughter beyond the protected environment of our home and I find myself studying adults with cerebral palsy, looking for models. I have met many valiant people who have engaged their suffering and have been transformed by the experience.

To engage suffering is a process. Dorothee Soelle describes it as a process having three stages.¹ The first phase of suffering is inarticulate pain and isolation, the second begins as people give voice to their pain through lament and seek understanding, and the third is marked by a willingness to be in solidarity with

others who suffer. Parents who are in pain because of their children's chronic illness need resources which will enable them to engage their suffering. The Christian faith has important offerings. One of these, the biblical story of the Gentile woman (Mark 7:24–30, Matthew 15:21–28) who approaches Jesus to seek the healing of her daughter, is an apt metaphor for a family's engagement with suffering.

The Gentile woman has various names. Mark calls her the Syro-Phoenician woman and Matthew the Canaanite woman. In the early church tradition this woman is known as Justa.² Justa's story is one in which the suffering of one member of the family has an impact on the rest of the family and in this way it shares a starting place with the family of a physically challenged child. There are differences in the children—the foreign woman's daughter is possessed by a demon—but in practical terms, such possession would have similarities with a chronic illness. The biblical family is very small, a woman who probably is divorced, widowed or never married, and her daughter.³ The woman's struggle for wholeness for her family challenges a worldview, changes boundaries and the balance of power, and helps to create the space and the energy for healing. We will look at what this experience might have been like for the biblical family, at how the woman's journey can be understood in the genre of divine journeys, at how the story can be seen as a narrative form of lament and, finally, we will consider the implications of this story for solidarity in suffering.

The Judaic Understanding of Sickness

There are, according to Klaus Seybold and Ulrich B. Mueller in their book *Sickness and Healing*, four strands of understanding sickness found in the Old Testament. These form the basis of attitudes in the time of Jesus, attitudes which would have had an impact on the Gentile woman and her daughter who, although they lived beyond the borders of Israel, were in an area where many Jews lived.

One strand, found in some of the Wisdom literature, draws on creation faith, an understanding that when God created the world, it was good. Thus occurrences in nature were not seen as having either a divine or demonic character.⁴ This attitude was one which allowed for the possibility of physicians, therapy, and the practice of healing arts.

The more dominant view in the New Testament period was that demons were responsible for sickness rather than natural occurrences in the body. Many who were afflicted were thought to be possessed by a demonic spirit, a spirit which had control over the person.

Sickness was also thought to put one into the realm of death. It was a serious threat to well-being. "There is no neutral zone, only life or death, good or evil. Earthly life is taken so seriously that when it involves sickness it can no longer be called life in the full sense of the word... Sickness is proximity to death."⁵

Finally, there was a strong belief that sickness was a consequence of sin, a form of punishment. This was an attitude which placed a serious burden on those who were afflicted. It caused much social isolation and would have had the effect of encouraging the ill person to turn inward in an attempt to find guilt. Seybold and Mueller note:

Judaism was in danger of becoming decidedly cruel out of reasons of piety. The sick, suffering person was not only seriously affected by his [sic] affliction, but was also confronted with the religious condemnation experienced because of that affliction. People believed they could determine from a person's affliction that he was guilty; indeed, they believed they could even determine the kind of guilt.⁶

In one sense, this understanding acknowledges the dimension of the spiritual in defining wholeness. One's relationships with other people and with God are part of one's well-being. The effect of the piety, however, was a form of blaming the victim, leading to increased isolation, the very opposite of what would help to restore health.

One can see how these latter attitudes would have had consequences for the Syro-Phoenician woman and her daughter. People understood the daughter to be possessed by a demon. She was now caught in the realm of death. It could be that she was being punished for her own sin or that of her parents (cf. John 9). Because she was in the realm of death, she was not part of the living community. This family is faced with the day to day stress of illness compounded by attitudes and beliefs which increase their isolation and, thus, their suffering. We can imagine the situation of this biblical family in ways that are characteristic of the first phase of suffering in Soelle's model.⁷ The family is mute, isolated, dominated by the situation, turned in on itself and powerless.

Besides its parallel with the experience of suffering in a family with a disabled child, there is another way in which this story can shed light on the experience of being disabled in our culture. That has to do with the concept of possession. Seybold and Mueller point to the widespread occurrence of possession at the time of early Christianity. In the experience of being possessed, the person “lost his [sic] own subjectivity and became void of will, an object of the ‘unclean spirit.’ ”⁸ They link this manifestation with the context of domination, socially and culturally, by a foreign power:

Foreign political domination was, for Jewish understanding, *eo ipso* associated with the concept of the reign of foreign gods or demons. . . . The external experience of powerlessness encountered in the face of this double oppression could be transferred to the interior.⁹

Rita Nakashima Brock, in *Journeys by Heart*, picks up on this linking of political oppression with its threat to personal integrity, comparing it with women’s experience. “The feminist concept of ‘the enemy within’—the internalization of a negative and destructive self-concept based on subordination by the dominant culture—and the Gospels’ picture of exorcism intersect.”¹⁰ Like women, those who are disabled may be subject to this same process of internalizing negative self-concepts from the dominant culture. The way a person is mirrored—or not—affects self-perception. If a disabled person perceives him or herself as being unwanted, a source of discomfort or even invisible, that message becomes a threat to personal integrity. The oppression of our culture, with its stress on physical beauty, is felt keenly by those who are physically disabled and their families. Like the child in the biblical story, part of healing for those who are disabled is the “exorcism” of this oppression.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, Justa, and her child begins with the experience of affliction but it does not end there. The suffering is engaged and acted upon. It becomes the vehicle for an encounter with the divine. In moving with the experience of suffering, the family is changed. The change is not one which comes from the outside entirely but rather it is one which occurs in the process and in the encounter between Jesus and the woman. It is, in a way, a “divine journey”.

The Divine Journey

Most studies of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman analyze form from the starting point of what Jesus does in the pericope. Thus some call this a healing story while others argue it is a controversy story.¹¹ A feminist hermeneutic also considers what the woman in the story is doing. Certainly she engaged Jesus in a contest of wits. This led me to look at other times when the use of wit in the Bible had changed the balance of power.¹² It also led to another source, the Ancient Near Eastern Myths and, particularly, the story “Inanna and Enki: The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization from Eridu to Erech”. This story belongs to the literary genre of the divine journey. In this genre, the god or goddess journeys, often by boat, to the sanctuary of another in order to obtain “a favorable destiny vis-a-vis the establishment of prosperity and abundance which the visited deity’s blessing would ensure”.¹³ Briefly, in this story, Inanna, glorying in her femaleness, sets off by ship to obtain from the god Enki the *me* (the divine ordinances which benefit a society by giving it structure and shape) for her own city. She is received by Enki who offers a feast. During the feast Enki drinks and begins an offer of sections of the *me* to Inanna. Inanna receives the *me* and then sets off on the journey home. Later, Enki sobers up and realizes the *me* are gone. Enki sends a deputy to return Inanna, and the goddess despatches her own vizier to defend the ship. Eventually the ship arrives home and the *me*, including some new ones, are given to the city of Erech. Later, Enki and Inanna are reconciled and become allies.

Inanna is a Seeker-Hero in this story, rather than a Victim-Hero.¹⁴ She is aware of a lack and sets out to change that. She travels to the one who has what she seeks and enters into a contest, in the end returning home with the gift of life for her people.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman has a similar form. The woman is aware that her daughter lacks wholeness, peace and self-possession so she sets out on a journey to meet the healer and exorcist about whom she has heard. She encounters obstacles—the disciples, and Jesus’ silence (in Matthew), her identity as a cultural and religious outsider, her situation as a woman in a context where women did not speak directly with a rabbi in public, the experience of being compared, in

a humiliating way, with dogs, the prior claim of the Jews on God's power and Jesus' ministry, and, finally, attitudes in the culture about illness and possession. Yet despite all the odds, she does procure Jesus' attention and when she does, enters into a contest with him, a verbal one, in order to achieve her goal. Like Tricksters in many cultures who lack other forms of power, this woman engages Jesus in this contest and wins by her wit, and by her willingness to challenge or critique the boundaries—between clean and unclean, between inside and outside, between Jew and Gentile.¹⁵ Jesus responds at this point to her desire for her family's healing and she returns home to find her daughter well. Inanna discovered when she arrived home that she had additional *me* and one can imagine that Justa, too, rejoiced not only in her daughter's healing but also in a new sense of empowerment and energy from her encounter with Jesus.

As Sharon Ringe points out, this story is an unusual one, a remembered incident when Jesus "was caught with his compassion down".¹⁶ The woman not only receives from her encounter with Jesus, she gives. Jesus tells her that her teaching, her word, has had effect (*dia touton ton logon*) and that because of it, the demon has left her daughter. "Her wit, her sharp retort, was indeed her gift to Jesus—a gift that enabled his gift of healing in turn, her ministry that opened up the possibility of his."¹⁷ Ringe identifies her gifts with sharp insight (rather than submission or obedience) and courage, "the courage of those who have little more to lose and therefore can act in commitment and from faith on behalf of others, for the sake of life, wholeness and liberation".¹⁸

We have seen how the situation of this biblical family shares some aspects of a family with a disabled child. Both are affected by the hardships of chronic illness and by the isolation that is brought on by suffering and by cultural attitudes. We have seen also that the woman engages her suffering and acts as an advocate for her daughter and how, in the process, she challenges boundaries and enables Jesus' healing ministry. Now we will look at the woman's approach to Jesus as a narrative form of lament, a vital phase in the engagement with suffering.

The Canaanite Woman's Lament

The genre of lament is most familiar from the psalms of lament in which an individual or the community engages God

in dialogue about their suffering and God's response.¹⁹ There are also several examples in the Hebrew Scriptures where lament occurs in a narrative form (Hebrew slaves, Hannah, Naomi). It is the thesis of Gail R. O'Day that the Matthean story of the Canaanite woman is such a narrative lament.

O'Day argues that, because attempts to identify this story as a miracle story or as a saying of Jesus ultimately fall short, we need to take another perspective. It is not a miracle story because neither the daughter's illness nor her actual healing are depicted but rather they seem to serve as the context for the conversation between the mother and Jesus. Sayings of Jesus are focused only on Jesus' words and are not tied to a particular location. This story focuses "not so much on what Jesus says as on what is said to him".²⁰ The geographical location is important to the story because it takes place outside of Israel in the region of Tyre and Sidon, traditional enemies of Israel in the Old Testament. The situation of potential threat is compounded by Matthew who calls the woman a Canaanite, evoking again reminders of ancient Israel's struggle with the Canaanites. Thus the woman is depicted as an enemy, one who is not of Jesus' kind. So it is, argues O'Day, that attempts to decide on a form by assuming Jesus is the protagonist will fail here because it is the woman who acts in this story.

Repeatedly, in Matthew's version, the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus. The first time Jesus ignores her plea. The disciples beg Jesus to send her away because of her noisiness. The woman appeals to Jesus again, and finally is heard though not agreed with. "The woman impinges on Jesus from all sides and does not hesitate to make her presence felt and demands known."²¹ By contrast, Jesus takes no initiative in the story. In the end he concedes and grants the woman's request. So, O'Day concludes, this is the story of the Canaanite woman:

She is insistent, demanding, and unafraid to state her claims. She is the lifeblood of the story. Any attempt to classify this text by placing Jesus at its center will ultimately be inadequate. We must instead look to the Canaanite woman's daring insistence as the key to the distinctive shape and form of this text.²²

The shape, argues O'Day, is that of a narrative lament. "The very boldness of the woman's stance before Jesus has its roots in Israel's bold stance before God in laments."²³ If the words of the woman are isolated they can be outlined in the elements of the lament form:

Petition:	Have mercy on me.
Address:	O Lord, Son of David
Complaint:	My daughter is severely possessed...
Address:	Lord
Petition:	Help me
Motivation:	For even the dogs eat the crumbs... ²⁴

The motivation is necessary because Jesus' initial response is to tell the woman why he cannot help her: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24), and later: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). The psalmists knew that it was sometimes necessary to remind God of who God is and how God should act. "Thus the central affirmation finally concerns the faithfulness of Yahweh to his promises..."²⁵ The story of the Canaanite woman is immediately preceded by a long discussion of clean and unclean in which Jesus announces that it is not that which goes into a person which defiles but that which comes out. In her motivation "even the dogs eat the crumbs", the woman is calling Jesus to be himself, to remember that what is clean or unclean is not marked by externals. She picks up on Jesus' reference to bread and talks of crumbs. Since the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is in the previous chapter, one cannot help but contrast that abundance which included twelve baskets of broken pieces left over, with Jesus' attitude toward the woman. What wonder she challenges Jesus! She recognizes her difference, her "otherness", but appeals to the God who is not only God of Israel but also God of the nations, a God who has abundant bread.

In the end, Jesus acknowledges the faith of this woman who will not let go. It is a faith which addresses the divine and expects a response. Like Israel who placed needs and suffering before God in lament and in expectation of God hearing and acting, the woman acted in faith that she would be heard. As in psalms of lament, this story moves from plea to praise as the daughter is healed.

The Canaanite woman stands in the tradition of those, like Moses, who argued with God. "She is not a Jew; she is, nevertheless, fully Jewish."²⁶ She argues with Jesus and, in the

process, Jesus is changed. In effect he becomes more fully himself, more true to the promise of salvation. It is a woman who lives on the margins, at the boundaries, who challenges Jesus to be open. From there, O'Day points out, Jesus moves on to heal (vv. 29–31) and feed multitudes (vv. 32–39). “The woman’s faith in Jesus reminds him of the fullness and vitality of the promise and he moves forward to fulfill that promise.”²⁷

A Call for Solidarity

We have seen how this biblical family might have experienced the suffering of muteness and isolation which Soelle describes as the first phase. We have also seen how the mother in this family moved to engage the suffering through choosing to act and to bring her complaint before God as she addresses Jesus. Hers is a stance of faith, a faith which challenges boundaries and seeks a redistribution of power. As we consider this story in relation to Soelle’s third phase of suffering, the question is what does this story say about the movement toward solidarity with others who suffer?

One aspect of solidarity is the willingness to act as an advocate for another, to team our power with another’s in order to effect changes which will be for that person’s well-being. Children, particularly, are in need of advocates who will notice their situations and act to help. This was true in Justa’s time and it continues to be true today. Justa’s daughter seems to have no one else who takes her plight seriously enough to seek help for her so the whole responsibility falls to this woman. Justa’s action in advocating for her daughter became a model in the Christian tradition for intercessory prayer—coming before God in solidarity with others who are in need.

The movement toward solidarity is a movement toward a more inclusive, radical vision of community. It challenges the accepted divisions among people because it has looked into the heart of suffering and has seen a shared humanity. Justa, it can be argued, has watched her child suffer and has suffered with her and because of her possession. Justa has engaged this experience of suffering, not allowing it to silence her, but breaking out of isolation. When she goes to Jesus, she does so knowing that she is different from him and that her claim on his ministry of healing is not, according to the current categories

of race, gender and religion, legitimate. Yet she knows a deeper claim. She and her daughter are human beings, creatures of God. It is their identity as human persons which is their claim to participation in community.

Nakashima Brock proposes a christology which sees Jesus at the centre of a healing community rather than as an isolated divine healer. In this way relationship and community become "the whole-making, healing centre of Christianity".²⁸ At work in this Christa/Community [Brock defines this as a christology centred in relationship and community as the whole-making, healing center of Christianity, in short, Christ. p. 52 editor] is erotic power by which she means the power of being and becoming, a power which "leads us, through the human heart, toward life-giving co-creating".²⁹ Because we human beings are so deeply relational, there is great vulnerability there as well as much grace. The vulnerability is "both the sign of our connectedness and the source of the damage that leads to sin".³⁰ She argues for a theology which does not see love's highest expression in self-sacrifice but rather in intimacy. She understands patriarchy as an ideology which works against intimacy and leads to much broken-heartedness because of the way power is understood and used. Patriarchal power is "hierarchical and is demonstrated by dominance, by status, by authority, and by control over people, nature and things".³¹ Rather than erecting divisions and barriers between groups of people, erotic power seeks to establish connections and relationships among people which are healing and liberating. Soelle's concept of solidarity in suffering is echoed by Nakashima Brock's erotic power:

The erotic compels us to be hungry for justice at our very depths because we are response-able. We are able to reject what makes us numb to the suffering and self-hatred of others. Acts against oppression become essential to ourselves, empowered from our energized centers. Through the erotic as power we become less willing to accept powerlessness, despair, depression and self-denial. The erotic is what binds and gives life and hope. It is the energy of all relationship and it connects us to our embodied selves. The empathetic sharing of any pursuit with another person helps us understand what is not shared. Hence differences become less threatening as we are empowered to affirm all persons in our lives, and to see through the faint, fearful broken heart of patriarchy.³²

Jesus is very much a part of this erotic power which binds up the broken-hearted in the healing space of community. Jesus

and those of the community are the locus of salvation. Jesus ministers and is the recipient of ministry offered him by others. Sometimes that ministry is offered by people who challenge him to see in a new way.

Nakashima Brock points to situations where Jesus seems unwilling or unable to help another: the woman with the flow of blood is one, the Syro-Phoenician woman another. These women are either unseen or unheard by Jesus. Jesus is, at this point, unable to be in solidarity with them in their suffering. Somehow, they must take the initiative to connect with him so they, too, can participate in erotic power. In both cases, Nakashima Brock suggests, it is Jesus' patriarchal power as a man which interferes with erotic power, with the creation of inclusive community, with solidarity:

[the hemorrhaging woman's] action allows Jesus fuller participation in erotic power, an action later repeated by the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) who shatters his view of religious exclusivity. In both cases, when Jesus stands most acutely in a position of exclusive social and religious privilege over another, he is unable or unwilling to help. It is the courageous work of the "other" that shatters his view of power and privilege. That courage challenges the structures of benign paternalism that would give Jesus the power from above to fix the power inequities involved.³³

Justa, the Syro-Phoenician woman, challenges the accepted boundaries and effects a redistribution of power which frees erotic power, creates healing and enriches community. She not only enables Jesus to be in solidarity with her family but the Christian tradition has taken her action as a model for all Gentiles who would claim a relationship with God. She is, in this way, in solidarity with all non-Jews who would seek God. She has, in her boldness, created a way for Jesus to be in solidarity with those previously beyond the bounds.

Justa's claim on God has implications for those who are disabled and those who love them. Like the woman, they must challenge those boundaries which would keep them as outsiders. They need to claim power for making decisions and choices in their own lives. Their persistence is particularly important for the healing of the able-bodied who may not recognize their own limits and vulnerability. By these actions they enable more people to participate in the erotic power which overcomes suffering and makes lives whole. By

these actions, they make themselves vulnerable to the intimacy of love. By these actions they help create and are part of Christa/Community.

The story of the encounter between Justa and Jesus is almost a parable in that it shatters a worldview and allows the in-breaking of the Realm of God. The church, if it identifies with Jesus, can take courage from Jesus' willingness to be challenged and changed, to be touched and made more whole by the confronting actions of an "other". Those who are disabled and their families can take the journey, the lament, the radical solidarity of Justa as a model for their own healing journey. As those who are physically challenged in turn challenge the church, there is the promise of greater wholeness, of salvation for all in the community.

Notes

- 1 Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).
- 2 Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, quoted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 100.
- 3 Sharon Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," in L. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 70.
- 4 Klaus Seybold and Ulrich B. Mueller, *Sickness and Healing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981) 110.
- 5 Ibid. 123.
- 6 Ibid. 126.
- 7 Soelle, *Suffering*, 69.
- 8 Seybold and Mueller, *Sickness and Healing*, 130.
- 9 Ibid. 131.
- 10 Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Boston: Crossroads, 1990) 77.
- 11 Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 97.
- 12 See Naomi Steinberg, "Israelite Tricksters, Their Analogies and Cross-Cultural Study," *Semeia* 42 (1988) 1-13.
- 13 A.J. Ferrara, *Nanna-Suen's Journey to Nippur*, Studia Pohl, Series Major, 2 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973).
- 14 Carol Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaras," *Semeia* 42 (1988) 91.
- 15 Steinberg, "Israelite Tricksters," 6.
- 16 Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," 71.
- 17 Ibid. 71.
- 18 Ibid. 72.

- 19 Important studies on lament include Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation*, 28 (1974) 20-38; Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation*, 31 (1977) 265-275 and "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 36 (1986) 57-71.
- 20 Gail R. O'Day, "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*, 24 (1989) 291.
- 21 *Ibid.* 293.
- 22 *Ibid.* 294.
- 23 *Ibid.* 294.
- 24 *Ibid.* 296-297.
- 25 Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," *Interpretation*, 28 (1974) 10.
- 26 O'Day, "Surprised by Faith," 299.
- 27 *Ibid.* 299.
- 28 Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 52.
- 29 *Ibid.* 41.
- 30 *Ibid.* 7.
- 31 *Ibid.* 25.
- 32 *Ibid.* 41.
- 33 *Ibid.* 84.